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What Would Lincoln Say To This Generation?

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What Would Lincoln Say to This Generation?

In the year 1809 there entered the life of this world a group of men who were destined to write their names in fadeless letters upon the pages of the history of humanity. In 1845 one of them, Alfred Tennyson, published his "In Memoriam." Although Tennyson in all probability had not at this time even heard the name of the yet unknown Springfield lawyer, there are lines in the poem which J. A. MacDonald, of the Toronto Globe, applies to Lincoln, saying, "his name alone seems to answer as the great original." I have also been told that James A. Garfield made the same application in his memorial address in Congress.

"Dost thou look back on what has been,
On some divinely gifted man
Whose life on low estate began,
And on a simple village green.

Who bursts his birth's invidious bar,
And grasps the skirts of happy chance;
And breasts the blows of circumstance,
And grapples with his evil star.

Who makes by force his merit known,
And lives to clutch the golden keys;
And mould a mighty state's decrees,
And shape the whisper of the throne.

And mounting on from high to higher,
Becomes on fortune's crowning slope
The pillar of a people's hope—
The center of a world's desire."

Lincoln was the man of the hour. He was also the man of the century. Stanton said at his death bed, "Now he belongs to the ages!"

Never has there been greater need than today, in America and throughout the world, for the ideal and the spirit of the Great Commoner. It is no idle question, then: "What would Lincoln say to this generation?" It

is a question the very asking of which is significant, and the answer to which—if answer can truly be made—will furnish light and guidance greatly needed in a perplexed and troubled time.

It is not my purpose to repeat the familiar story of his life, nor recount his achievements. He needs no tribute of mine. His place and fame are secure. None has ever worded this better than Lowell in his Commemoration Ode—

> "He knew to bide his time,
> And can his fame abide;
> Still patient in his simple faith sublime,
> 'Till the wise years decide.
> Great captains, with their guns and drums,
> Disturb our judgment for the hour,
> Then the silence comes;
> And, standing like a tower,
> Our children shall behold his fame,
> The kindly-earnest, wise, foreseeing man;
> Sagacious, patient, dreading praise, not blame;
> New birth of our new soil,
> The first American."

Certainly Lincoln is entitled to a hearing—none more so at such a time. His words will have weight and value, the weight of wisdom and the value of vision.

He is entitled to a hearing by reason of his deeds. His services to his generation,—all generations—; to his land,—all lands and all people—these entitle him to a hearing.

He merits a hearing because of the greatness of his mind, the power of his intellect, the clarity of his reason, the sanity of his judgment, that quality of his thought which enabled him to pierce through the unimportant and to penetrate beneath the secondary and superficial, to strip off the inconsequential and the accidental, and to go straight and unfailingly to the real issue and to reach the real truth.

He commands a hearing by virtue of the rare worth of his life, the strength and sincerity of his character, the simplicity of his spirit; by virtue of his unselfishness and sacrificial devotion to a great cause, his loyalty to truth and justice; his sublime and unwavering belief in righteousness, and in its certain victory; his simple and unfaltering faith in God and His moral government of the world.

"What would Lincoln say?" Who dare attempt an answer? Who is wise enough, unselfish enough, prophetic enough to speak in this troubled

hour the clear, sane, healing, illumining words he would utter if he were but here to speak to his countrymen and to the world?

There is but one way by which such a question may be answered; namely, by the repetition of words he uttered in the great public addresses of his life time; and the application of the great and enduring wisdom of these words, interpreted in the light of his life and his spirit, to the problems of our own day. In such a way an answer to the question may be had, and such an answer will be worth the seeking and worth pondering in our hearts when it is found.

It is one of the most remarkable facts in our history that this man, born in most humble circumstances, whose youth and early manhood were spent upon the frontier,—this man who had all told scarcely more than six months of regular schooling, who walked six miles to borrow an English grammar and twenty miles to borrow his first law books,—should, when he reached the maturity of his power and the day of his opportunity, have delivered addresses ranking with those of Patrick Henry and Daniel Webster; two of them, the Gettysburg Oration and the Second Inaugural, among the greatest ever uttered in our English speech, or in any speech at any time.

During the five or six years immediately preceding his Presidency and during the slightly more than four years he was in office he delivered a series of the greatest addresses in our history. By the use of certain passages from six or eight of these speeches I propose to answer the question I have asked.

The address which Lincoln himself considered as perhaps as able a speech as he ever made was delivered in 1854, first at the State Fair at Springfield and later at Peoria. It was called forth by the repeal of the Missouri Compromise in which action Stephen A. Douglas had been a leader. It was really the beginning of that great debate between Lincoln and Douglas which continued for four years, culminating in that series of joint discussions which had so much to do with the history of this nation. This address, dealing with a matter which is no longer a problem in our political life, is referred to at this time simply because it was upon this occasion that Lincoln first attained national prominence, and also first began to deal with public problems upon the high level of right and justice; which attitude of mind and method of speech, increasing as the years went on, made him more and more like the ancient Hebrew prophets in personal conviction and public utterance.

Before passing to a further consideration of some of the addresses from which lessons are drawn for our present day we must notice briefly

the most dramatic episode in all Lincoln's career—the delivery of "The Lost Speech of Bloomington." It was in 1856. The convention for the organization of the Republican party had assembled in Bloomington. There were in attendance many earnest, even fanatical, men of different parties. They were discordant, envious, even hostile. There was need for some one to unify them, to fuse them by the heat of mingled passion and logic into a real unity of spirit and purpose. Aware of the momentous nature of the occasion and stirred to great passion, not alone by his hate of slavery but by the threat of disunion, Lincoln, on this occasion, more than at any other, gave way to that fiery nature which ordinarily he kept so well under control. It is recorded that he spoke slowly at first then with increasing fire and fervor until he fused the discordant elements by the fire of a great passion; so that his hearers arose from their chairs and with pale faces and quivering lips pressed unconsciously toward him. The whole man seemed to be ablaze with passionate earnestness which communicated itself to his hearers so that never was an audience more electrified. The very reporters, such as Joseph Medill, later editor of the Chicago Tribune, became so absorbed that they forgot to take notes; and Lincoln himself, appealed to later to reproduce the address, was unable to set down in order either his thoughts or his language, so that only fragments of the lost speech exist to this day. Herndon, later his law partner, declared that the Bloomington speech was the one grand effort of Lincoln's life; that it was then that the inner fires broke forth; that Lincoln felt and uttered words of enduring justice; that he seemed as one standing before the throne of eternal right. A great crisis in the political life of the country had been met. Though the words of the speech are not recorded it is written upon the pages of our nation's history.

The speech delivered at the meeting of the Republican State Convention in Illinois in 1858 has its importance in marking the dividing of the ways for Lincoln and for the party for which he became the acknowledged leader. One way led to compromise and evasion, the other way led to the enunciation and acceptance of moral principles as regnant in public affairs. When Lincoln showed the advance draft of this address to certain advisers he was urged to change it and omit a certain passage. These advisers declared that to utter the words he had in mind at that time would be fatal to his political prospects, and that it would mean political suicide. But more than once did Lincoln commit political suicide, and more than once did he emerge as by a resurrection. In answer to his counsellors he said "The time has come when these sentiments should be uttered; and if it is decreed that I should go down because of this speech, then let me go

down linked to the truth—let me die in the advocacy of what is just and right." The particular quotation from this speech from which it derives its very name is *"a house divided against itself cannot stand."* Lincoln, of course, was referring to the institution of human slavery. He declared that the government could not endure permanently half slave and half free, but that it must become all one thing or all the other.

The application of this warning against a divided house is evident in its force and timeliness. In this great time we must guard against anything decisive, against class distinction, against whatever militates against real national unity. That man, whoever he may be, who, for private advantage and selfish ends—or even for the promotion of the interests of a party,—seeks to set North against South, or East against West, interest against interest, or class against class, is at this time a traitor to his land and to humanity. The unity of our citizenship must be maintained. There is no room for a divided loyalty. Partisanship must end at the water line. All men under the flag must be wholeheartedly committed to the great cause to which we have pledged our support.

There is also a wider application in the field of international unity. *A world divided against itself cannot stand.* The day has passed when one part of humanity can live under one condition and another part under another. The world must become all autocratic or all democratic. In a new sense it must become all slave or all free. This is the far reaching significance and must be the far reaching outcome of the world war. The future must be controlled by kings or be free peoples. The world has become too small to be divided.

The next speech to which attention is called was delivered in Clinton, Ill. During a speech earlier in the day Douglas had charged Lincoln with being in favor of negro equality, a charge which at that time and in that part of the state he thought would work serious damage to Lincoln. But Lincoln was brave enough to meet the challenge. In his speech that evening he said: "Judge Douglas charges me with being in favor with negro equality. I am guilty of hating servitude and loving freedom. While I would not carry the equality of the races to the extent charged by my adversary I am happy to confess before you that in some things the black man is the equal of the white man—*in the right to eat the bread his own hands have earned he is the equal of Judge Douglas or any living man.*"

Judge Weldon, who was present, says when Lincoln spoke the last sentence he had lifted himself to his full height, and as he reached his hands toward the stars of that still night then and there fell from his

lips one of the most sublime expressions of American statesmanship. "The effect was grand, the cheers tremendous."

It must be remembered that this was said before the Civil War when it took high courage and high statesmanship to declare the rights of men then slaves. If Lincoln were among us today he would with like passion declare the rights of the common man. That democracy in which we believe and for which we fight was also very dear to his heart. He stood as champion of the rights of the humblest citizen. To him a place equal to the most favored was rightfully to be given to the humblest toiler. So must we in this our day also ever recall that the men who perform the labor, bear the burdens, endure the sorrows of the world, must be reckoned with by all who seek to rule. *Before the law and in fundamental human rights all men are equal!*

A second application of the sentiments of this address may properly be made in the discussion of the rights of peoples. Lincoln would give heartiest support to that phrase which our President has uttered and which is certain to have large place in the shaping of the peace that is to come—"the self-determination of peoples." It is perhaps not too much to say that this will be the final outcome of the present war, that the time has come when every national group bound together by ties of race and custom and language *must be given freedom to work out its own destiny.* The world has long enough suffered the injustices of alien rule. As in his discussion of the slavery question Lincoln declared that no man is good enough to own another man, so would he now voice the growing conviction of the world that *no race is good enough to control the destinies of another race.* He put the matter most clearly when he said "When the white man governs himself, that I acknowledge is self-government; but when the white man governs himself and another man besides, that I call despotism."

The Lincoln-Douglas debates during the summer and fall of 1858 may be treated as one utterance, repeated and amplified at many times and places. It was the great series in which Lincoln met the "Little Giant." Douglas is thought of by many, especially of the younger generation, simply as the opponent of Lincoln. He died while the Civil War was still raging and his remarkable genius and his final high patriotism may not be fully known to men of the present date. He was indeed a man of most remarkable ability. Think of this youth of twenty walking into Winchester, Ill., in 1833 with thirty-seven cents in his pocket; who, in less than fifteen years, and before he himself was thirty-five years of age, had been first a clerk at an auction sale; second, a teacher; then a student

of the law, and later admitted to the practice of his profession; Attorney General of the state; Registrar of Deeds by the President's appointment; member of the State Legislature; Secretary of State; Justice of the Supreme Court; member of the lower house of the United States Congress; and United States Senator.

It is only justice also to recall his later services. Although the election of Lincoln to the presidency resulted from the defeat of Douglas himself and thereby wrested from him the great prize which had been the ambition of his life, yet in the time of the nation's great need he rose above selfishness and self-seeking to the level of the true patriot. The story is recorded that at the very moment of Lincoln's inauguration Douglas held the famous high hat which Lincoln had removed and for which he was awkwardly seeking a resting place. I have learned from one well informed of the events of that period that, when Sumter was fired upon, within a few hours' time Douglas was seen wending his way to the White House where he was closeted for more than an hour with Lincoln in one of the most momentous conferences which ever transpired in our history. What transpired in that conference we do not know, but Douglas immediately thereafter telegraphed to his supporters in Illinois and issued a public statement to the million Northern Democrats who had voted for him urging them all to the support of the Union. He also immediately returned to Illinois and in that then divided state before a joint meeting of the two houses of the Illinois Legislature urged the State to stand by the Union and to support the President. It is perhaps not too much to say that Douglas contributed by these patriotic acts very largely to the preservation of the Union.

In challenging Douglas to these joint debates Lincoln manifested a farseeing political sagacity. He so conducted the campaign that though Douglas won the immediate price of re-election to the United States Senate he did so upon a platform which resulted in the division of the Northern and Southern Democracy and which consequently made possible the election of Lincoln as the first Republican President. These debates aroused enormous interest. They were in very truth battles of the giants. They have been characterized as the greatest debates in history. I select a typical sentence from the debate at Galesburg, Ill., now recorded on a bronze tablet opposite the main entrance to Old Main at Knox College. *"They are blowing out the moral lights around us who contend that whoever wants to own slaves has a right to do so."* Here Lincoln clearly put the issue of human slavery upon moral grounds. This had been done before by such radical abolitionists as Garrison and Lovejoy, and now

Lincoln as a political leader and spokesman for a party lifted a matter before discussed upon the levels of political expediency to the higher level of ethics.

In such a time as this there is need for the voice that should declare that the issue of statesmanship must finally be met on the level of moral principles; that the ultimately controlling elements in international relations must be the questions of justice and of righteousness. They seek to blow out the moral lights around us, to overturn the very bases of national security and human progress who declare, in false philosophy and by inhuman deeds of unhallowed war, that a people which desires for itself power and supremacy and a place in the sun has a right to disregard international law, violate treaties, invade and oppress neutral nations, and endeavor to gain military advantage and ill-won victory by the devices of the savage. No measure of scientific advancement can claim exemption from the solemn judgment of the nobler sense of humanity when that science is used in the interest of organized barbarism. As Lincoln wrote on one occasion, "Men are not flattered by being told that there is a difference of purpose between the Almighty and them. To deny it, however, in this case, is to deny that there is a God governing the world." *In just such words would he again denounce those whose unholy aims and aspirations run counter to the ethical sense and moral judgment of the civilized world.*

What was in some respects the greatest public success of Lincoln's life was the Cooper Institute speech delivered in this city early in 1860. Lincoln had received an invitation from a young men's society in Plymouth Church to come to Brooklyn and deliver a lecture. For it he was to receive $200. He had been neglecting his law practice and was in need of money and this fee looked very attractive to him. At the same time he was fearful that the young men would lose money by the venture and so accepted with some hesitation. His concern was the greater when he reached New York and found that the original plan had been abandoned and that the address was to be delivered in Cooper Institute. But when the night arrived that great building was thronged with an audience which contained practically every man of prominence in the political, intellectual, and business life of the metropolis. Lincoln was escorted to the platform by Horace Greeley and David Dudley Field. William Cullen Bryant presided. Joseph Choate, who was present, declared that Lincoln came an unheralded stranger and went away wearing the laurels of a great triumph. When he spoke he was transformed, his eye kindled, his voice rang, his face shone and seemed to light up the whole assembly. For an

hour and a half he held his audience in the hollow of his hand. The grand simplicities of the Bible with which he was so familiar were reflected in his discourse. It was marvellous to see how this untutored man by mere self-discipline and his own unchastened spirit had found his way to the grandeur and the strength of absolute simplicity.

He concluded with the familiar sentence *"Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith let us to the end do our duty as we understand it."*

Here is the answer of the world to the insolent declaration by official Germany that might is right. In answer and defiance to that claim there has been an instinctive uprising in the heart of every man, and the banded people of the nations have thrown back the answer "It's a lie!"

It was with a similar faith in the triumph of righteousness that Lincoln replied to a delegation of ministers who waited upon him in the White House and whose spokesman said, "Let us pray that the Lord may be on our side." Lincoln's reply was immediate—"Let us rather pray that we may be found on the Lord's side." Contrast such words as these with the Kaiser's infamous statement "God has shown Himself to be the uncompromising ally of the Germans." No, I think better of God, *for I believe in Lincoln's God, not the hideous deity of Teutonic blasphemy!*

There is a phrase in this sentence from the Cooper Institute speech which must not be forgotten. Lincoln not only called to our minds the fact that right makes might but added the further words we must always hear and obey, "in that belief let us to the end do our duty as we understand it."

High and solemn words! And words which we may well take to heart; as, with no seeking of either private or public gain, with no end or purpose beyond that openly avowed, with passions disciplined and restrained—but yet with a holy indignation at wrongs revealed—we enter the mighty and momentous struggle *for the life of the world, for civilization and righteousness, for the rights of little peoples and common men, and for the future peace of the world.*

If the Cooper Institute speech was one of the great triumphs of Lincoln's career the first Inaugural was one of the most pathetic and yet as viewed from the standpoint of history, deeply impressive moments in his life. Lincoln perceived, as perhaps few men of his time did, how great was the likelihood of serious difficulty with the South, and how greatly to be dreaded and earnestly to be avoided was the war which he foresaw. Determined above almost everything else that the Union should be preserved at whatever cost he labored most earnestly to persuade the people

of the Southern States that they would be dealt with justly and that the issues which were dividing North and South might be worked out without the terrible experience of war. He therefore plead with the South not to precipitate strife by hasty action. In this first Inaugural is this notable passage, "We are not enemies but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break the bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone, all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

In his Inaugural address he uttered this sentence which we may well ponder in this day, *"Why should there not be a patient confidence in the ultimate justice of the people?"*

Confidence in the people! When have kings and autocracies ever been willing to trust the people? Yet reformers and patriots have ever turned at last from rulers and nobles to the masses. And here the Great Commoner, who had come from the cabin of the pioneer, who knew and trusted common folks, voiced a sentiment which is almost an echo of the long unanswered question of the centuries, "why should we not be willing to trust the ultimate wisdom and justice of the people?" There is no other way out for Democracy. For popular government the way out is the way ahead. *The only cure for the mistakes and failures of freedom is in a larger and truer liberty!*

There are two addresses by Lincoln which by virtue of their noble language and exalted thought, their fitness for the time when uttered, and their lasting value rise above all his other words and above everything uttered by his contemporaries. These are the Gettysburg Oration and the Second Inaugural.

The Gettysburg Oration was delivered on Nov. 19, 1863 upon the occasion of the dedication of a national cemetery on the field of the decisive battle of the war. It is said that the invitation to President Lincoln was almost an afterthought, that the original plans of the committee did not include provision for the address which has become so famous; but that finally as a matter of propriety an invitation was extended to the President, and upon his acceptance of the invitation a place for him on the programme was designated. The address, so brief and yet so complete, followed a masterly oration by Edward Everett. Though occupying scarcely more than two minutes of time it contained every element of a great oration. The first sentence set forth as fully as could have been done in an hour's time the historic background. "Four score and seven

years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." The second sentence gives in few words a characterization of the great conflict. "Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure." The next two sentences give the local setting and occasion, "We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live." Then Lincoln goes on to say, "It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate—we cannot consecrate—we cannot hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract." Then came one of the most sublime and daring moments in human speech. Lincoln had come to dedicate a few acres of ground as a soldier's cemetery. He lifted his eyes to the faces of the living. Beyond them he saw yet others, a nation of men and women committed to a great cause. Beyond them he saw their children, generation after generation of men and women yet to come. It may be that he saw yet more—the nations of the earth! Speaking almost like a prophet of old he turned from the dedication of the resting place of the dead to the dedication of a people to a great cause. He said, "It is for us, the living, rather, *to be dedicated* here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. * * * That here we highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom; and that *government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.*"

That moment, that solemn act of dedication—by one, who, in very truth stood as a prophet of the eternal God in behalf of human liberty, *made it impossible that America should permanently stay out of this war.*

There are three points at which application can most fittingly be made to the mighty question of our day. First, as Lincoln said more than fifty years ago so say we now, *"These dead must not have died in vain."* When peace comes, as pray God it may come soon, it must not come upon any basis which shall leave out of account the rights of the millions of men who have already given their lives to be silently but effectively represented at the council table. No patched up peace that shall make their death fruitless can ever be tolerated by men in whom the spirit of Lincoln moves.

And second, of course, is the unescapable application of the words which have become so familiar to us all, *"government of the people, by the*

people, for the people." It is for democracy that the world is struggling. It is for the rights of people that the battles have been fought and that the armies of the nations are still embattled.

But there is a third point in this address which I confess I had not until recently noticed or felt in its full power. As Lincoln closed it was with the assertion and prophecy that popular government should not perish; but he did not say from the state of New York or from the United States of America, or from this or that nation. He did say "it shall not perish *from the earth.*" That vision will not be fully made real until every man the world around lives under a government in which he has a voice and a part, and which is constituted and administered in his behalf.

The Second Inaugural was delivered when the end of the war was almost at hand. In it the discerning reader will find the presence of a vision of the future and wise plans for reconstruction and reconciliation. Lincoln was much of a mystic, and in these last years of his life he became more and more imbued with a sense of divine purpose and leadership. Beyond all question he became convinced also that the great task ahead was that of dealing with the South after the war had ended. In Lincoln's far seeing plans there was no bitterness nor hatred, no evidence of an intolerance in victory; but such a magnanimity and such a brooding tenderness in his whole attitude toward the states which he declared could not "return" to the Union for they had never been out of it; such a longing for the healing of every hurt and binding up of every wound that he became almost Christ-like in his purpose and even in his death. For it may be that a wiser history can discern that in the very laying down of his life Lincoln did more for the real restoration of the Union than could he have done even had he lived. His death had in it the quality of an Atonement. His blood was the price of national Redemption. His spirit, his words, his deeds, his death all wrought together for the accomplishment of a great Reconciliation.

This longing for reconciliation breathed throughout the Second Inaugural address so nobly that the London Times called it "the most sublime state paper of the century." The two closing paragraphs indicate the basis of moral judgment and of Christ-like charity upon which this address spoken to north and south both was framed. "Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand

years ago, so still it must be said, '*The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.*'

With malice toward none; with charity for all;—with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish *a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.*"

How timely do all these words of the Martyred President seem. It is as though they had been uttered but yesterday. It is as though he himself once more stood before us to declare unto us the great truth for the seeing of which our own eyes had been too blinded and for the hearing of which our ears too deafened by the tumult of a terrible time. Across the years his voice sounds clear. He proclaims the unalterable truths of justice and of judgment; he lays firm the bases of a new era upon the immovable foundations of a broad humanity and an enduring liberty; he gains for us the sharing through his prophetic foreseeing of the vision of the future of a world redeemed from slavery and fear and highly dedicated by the sacrifices of heroes to the well being of all the peoples of the earth.

Such were the words of Lincoln. And such is his message to our day. *He being dead yet speaketh!*

"And so they buried Lincoln? Strange and vain!
Has any creature thought of Lincoln hid
In any vault, 'neath any coffin lid,
In all the years since that wild spring of pain?
'Tis false—he never in the grave has lain.
You could not bury him although you slid
Upon his clay the Cheops pyramid
Or heaped it with the Rocky Mountain chain.

They slew themselves; they but set Lincoln free.
In all the world his great heart beats as strong,
Shall beat while pulses throb to chivalry
And burn with hate of tyranny and wrong.
Whoever will may find him anywhere
Save in the grave! Not there, he is not there!"

(James S. Mackey.)

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The Lenten Lectures at the Tompkins Avenue Congregational Church were established by the late Dr. Nacy McGee Waters in 1906, and have been maintained without interruption since that date. Through these lectures the church seeks to render a service not only to its own membership but to the community.

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